

# Lao Tzu

*Encyclopedia of World Biography*, December 12, 1998

**Born:** c. 604 BC

**Died:** c. 531 BC

**Other Names:** Master Lao; Lao Tze; Li Erh; Laozi; Li Er; Li Dan; Erh, Li; Lao Tzu; Lao-tsze; Li Tan; Lao Lai Tzu

**Nationality:** Chinese

**Occupation:** Philosopher

Lao Tzu (6th century BC) is believed to have been a Chinese philosopher and the reputed author of the "Tao te ching," the principal text of Taoist thought. He is considered the father of Chinese Taoism.

Lao Tzu purportedly was an older contemporary of the great philosopher Confucius (551-479 BC). Lao Tzu is said to have founded a philosophical school known as the Tao Chia (School of the Tao), whose teaching centered on the vague and indefinable concept of *tao*, usually translated "way." This school taught quietism and a nonaggressive approach to life. By the 4th century B.C. there were many Taoist masters who claimed to elaborate on Lao Tzu's original teachings.

## Three Lao Tzus

The main source of information on Lao Tzu's life is a biography written by the historian Ssu-ma Ch'ien (145-86 B.C.) in his *Records of the Historian*. By this time a number of traditions about the founder of Chinese Taoism were circulating, and Ssu-ma Ch'ien himself was unsure of their authenticity. The biography in fact contains an account of not one, but three, men called Lao Tzu. The first Lao Tzu was a man named Li Erh or Li Tan who came from the village of Ch'ü-jen in the southern Chinese state of Ch'u. Li Erh served as historian in charge of the official archives in the Chinese imperial capital of Loyang. He was a contemporary of Confucius and is reported to have granted an interview to the Confucian master when he came to Loyang seeking information on the Chou ritual.

Another man identified as the founder of Taoism was one Lao Lai Tzu, who also came from Ch'u. He is designated as a contemporary of Confucius and is attributed with a 15-chapter book expounding the teachings of the Taoist school. Nothing more is known about him.

According to a third account, the original Lao Tzu lived 129 years after the death of Confucius. This man went by the name of Tan, the historian of Chou.

Actually, it is impossible to verify the historicity of any of these accounts. Lao Tzu is not really a person's name and is only an honorific designation meaning "old man." It was common in this period to refer to respected philosophers and teachers with words meaning "old" or "mature." It is possible that a man who assumed the pseudonym Lao Tzu was a historical person, but the term Lao Tzu is also applied as an alternate title to the supreme Taoist classic, *Tao te ching* (Classic of the Way and the Power).

According to Ssu-ma Ch'ien, Lao Tzu had been serving in the Chou capital for a long time and finally became disillusioned with the corrupt political situation and decided to go into retirement. As he was passing through the Hanku Pass west of Loyang, the gatekeeper stopped him and asked him to write down a book of his teachings. Lao Tzu then composed a book of 5,000 characters in 2 sections which described the theory of the *tao* and *te*. This book was then known as the *Tao te ching*.

Lao Tzu is frequently associated with the other famous early Chinese thinker, Confucius. There are numerous stories about debates that allegedly took place between these two great philosophers, in which Lao Tzu invariably was the winner. These stories are undoubtedly anti-Confucian propaganda circulated by members of the Taoist school, perhaps as early as the 4th century B.C.

## ***Tao te ching***

The *Tao te ching* itself is a collection of sayings expounding the principal Taoist teachings. Most scholars now agree that Lao Tzu did not write this book, mainly because no one knows whether he was a historical person. The most plausible theory is that there was a large number of maxims and aphorisms that were part of the Taoist teaching. They were memorized and passed on from teacher to pupil. Eventually the best of these sayings were collected and edited into the book which was then given the title *Tao te ching*. A study of the style and grammar of the work reveals that it must have been compiled about the 4th century BC.

The *Tao te ching* has baffled its readers for centuries. Its language is extremely terse and cryptic. Much of the text is rhymed. Although the work is divided into chapters, the passages of a chapter do not always pertain to the same subject. Thus, it hardly qualifies as a systematic philosophical discourse.

The most important concept developed in the *Tao te ching* is *tao*. *Tao* literally means "road" or "way." In the *Tao te ching* it is depicted as something ineffable, a concept beyond definition. "The way (*tao*) that can be told of is not the constant way." *Tao* is so indescribable that the term itself is often not used and is referred to only indirectly. *Tao* stands as the force behind the universe. There is even an implication that it is the universe itself.

An important quality of the *tao* is its "weakness," or "submissiveness." Because the *tao* itself is basically weak and submissive, it is best for man to put himself in harmony with the *tao*. Thus, the *Tao te ching* places strong emphasis on nonaction (*wu wei*), which means the absence of aggressive action. Man does not strive for wealth or prestige, and violence is to be avoided. This quietist approach to life was extremely influential in later periods and led to the development of a particular Taoist regimen that involved special breathing exercises and special eating habits that were designed to maintain quietude and harmony with the *tao*.

---

## **Further Readings**

- Lao Tzu and the *Tao te ching* in particular have been a favorite subject for study in both China and the West. The best translations of the *Tao te ching*, which include extensive discussions of the legend and early Taoist thought, are Arthur Waley, *The Way and Its Power* (1935); J. J. L. Duyvendak, *The Book of the Way and Its Virtue* (1954); and D. C. Lau, *Lao Tzu: Tao Te Ching* (1963).

**Full Text:** COPYRIGHT 2016 Gale, Cengage Learning.

---

**Source Citation**

"Lao Tzu." *Encyclopedia of World Biography*. Detroit: Gale, 1998. *Biography in Context*. Web. 2 Mar. 2016.

**URL**

[http://ic.galegroup.com/ic/bic1/BiographiesDetailsPage/BiographiesDetailsWindow?failOverType=&query=&windowstate=normal&contentModules=&display-query=&mode=view&displayGroupName=Biographies&limiter=&currPage=&disableHighlighting=true&displayGroups=&sortBy=&search\\_within\\_result\\_s=&p=BIC1&action=e&catId=GALE%7CAAA000070006&activityType=&scanId=&documentId=GALE%7CK1631003787&source=Bookmark&u=mlin\\_s\\_ocln&jsid=b43ee455f6478116fe76df0e4e007239](http://ic.galegroup.com/ic/bic1/BiographiesDetailsPage/BiographiesDetailsWindow?failOverType=&query=&windowstate=normal&contentModules=&display-query=&mode=view&displayGroupName=Biographies&limiter=&currPage=&disableHighlighting=true&displayGroups=&sortBy=&search_within_result_s=&p=BIC1&action=e&catId=GALE%7CAAA000070006&activityType=&scanId=&documentId=GALE%7CK1631003787&source=Bookmark&u=mlin_s_ocln&jsid=b43ee455f6478116fe76df0e4e007239)

**Gale Document Number:** GALE|K1631003787